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CENTENARY ODE



PERCY MAC KAYE



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BY PERCY MACKAYE



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TORONTO

ODE ON THE CENTENARY OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

BY
PERCY MACKAYE

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*Yet may we strive to trace
His shadow—where it pulses vast
Upon imagination, cast
By the oft-handtrimm'd lamp of history—
In carved breath, or bronze, that we may scan
The imagined child and man
Whose life and death are looms of our own destiny.*

Delivered before the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences
at the Academy of Music, Brooklyn, New York
February, 1909

I

IT was the season bleak
Of silence and long night,
And solemn starshine and large solitude;
Hardly more husht the world when first the word
Of God creation stirred,
Far steep in wilderness. By the frore creek,
Mute in the moon, the sculptured stag in flight
Paused, panting silver; in her cedarn lair,

Crouched with her starveling litter, the numb lynx
Winked the keen hoar-frost, quiet as a sphinx ;
On the lone forest trail
Only the coyote's wail
Quivered, and ceased.
It was the chrisom rude
Of winter and wild beast
That consecrated, by harsh nature's rite,
A meagre cabin crude,
Builded of logs and bark,
To be a pilgrim nation's hallow'd ark
And shrine the goal aspiring ages seek.

No ceremonial
Of pealèd chime was there, or blarèd horn,
Such as hath blazoned births of lesser kings,
When he—the elder brother of us all,
Lincoln—was born.

At his nativity
Want stood as sponsor, stark Obscurity
Was midwife, and all lonely things
Of nature were unconscious ministers
To endow his spirit meek
With their own melancholy. So when he—
An infant king of commoners—

Lay in his mother's arms, of all the earth
[Which now his fame wears for a diadem]
None heeded of his birth ;
Only a star burned over Bethlehem
More bright, and, big with prophecy,
A secret gust from that far February
Fills now the organ-reeds that peal his centenary.

II

WHO shall distil in song those epic years?
Only the Sibyl of simplicity,
Touched by the light and dew of common tears,
Might chant that homely native Odyssea.

For there are lives too large in simple truth
For art to limn or elegy to gauge,
And there are men so near to God's own ruth
They are the better angels of their age,

And such was he : beyond the pale of song
His grandeur looms in truth, with awful grace ;
He lives where beauty's origins belong
Deep in the primal raptures of his race.

Yet may we strive to trace
His shadow — where it pulses vast
Upon imagination, cast
By the oft-handtrimm'd lamp of history —
In carved breath, or bronze, that we may scan
The imagined child and man
Whose life and death are looms of our own destiny.

III

THE loveliness which is reality
Surrounds us, but its glamorous romance
We glean afar from heroes of old France,
Or Hellas' arms, or Gothic heraldry,
While Roland and his conquerors
With Sigmund sleep beside our doors,
And Homer's age awaits us at our hearth.

How like a saga of the northern sea
Our own Kentucky hero-tale begins!

Once on a time, far in a wintry wood,
A lone hut stood ;
There lived a poor man's son, that was to be
A master man of earth.

And so for us,
Like children in the great hall of his spirit,
The homebred fairy-story spins
Annals whose grace the after-times inherit.

The uncouth homestead by the trail of Boone,
The untitled grant, the needy exodus,
The ox-cart on the Indiana heath,

The log shack by the Sangamon, and soon
The fever'd mother and the forest death —
From these the lonely epic wanders on.

The longshank boy, with visage creased by toil
And laughter of the soil,
Cribbing his book of statutes from his chore,
Erelong his nooning fellows of the field
Hail their scrub-orator, or at sundown —
Slouching his gaunt and sallow six-foot-four —
Their native Touchstone of the village store.
Or from the turf, where he has matched his build

To throw the county champion in the loam,
Idly he saunters home
To rock some mother's cradle in the town ;
Or, stretched on counter calico, with Clay
And organ-sounding Webster, dream the night away.

But time begins
Slowly to sift the substance from the slag.
And now along the county pike's last lap,
With giant shins
Shut knifewise in his wabbling rattletrap,
The circuit lawyer trots his tired nag

Toward the noon tavern, reins up, and unrolls
His awkward length of wrinkled bombazine,
Clutching his tattered green
Umbrella and thin carpetsack,
And flings a joke that makes the rafters roar :
As if, uplooming from of yore,
Some quaint-accoutred king of trolls,
Out-elbowing a sexton's suit of black
In Christmas glee,
Should sudden crack
His shrilly jest of shrewd hilarity,
And shake the clambering urchins from his back.

IV

HOW vast the war invisible
When public weal battles with public will !
Proudly the stars of Union hung their wreath
On the young nation's lordly architrave ;
Yet underneath
Its girding vaults and groins,
Half the fair fabric rested on the loins
And stooping sinews of a slave,

That — raised to the just stature of a man —
Should rend the whole asunder.

And now the million-headed serf began
To stir in wonder,
And from the land, appalled by that low thunder,
“ Kansas-Nebraska ! ” rang
The cry, and with exceeding pang
Out of the earth blood sprang
And out of men’s hearts, fire. And that hot flame,
Fed by the book that burned in all men’s homes,
Kindled from horizon to horizon

Anguish and shame
And aspiration, by its glow
Ruddying the state-house domes
With monstrous shadows of Dred Scott
And gaunt-limbed effigies of Garrison.

Then in the destined man matured the slow
Strong grandeur of that lot
Which singled him ; till soon,
Ushered with lordly train,
The champion Douglas met him on the plain,
And the broad prairie moon

Peered through white schooners at the mad bonfires
And multitudes astir,
Where — roped like wrestlers in a ring —
The *Little Giant* faced the *Railsplitter*;
And serious crowds harked silently,
With smothered taunts and ires,
While Commonsense grappled with ‘Sovereignty,’
Till the lank, long-armed wrestler made his fling.
And still sublime
With common sympathy, that cool
Sane manfulness survives: *You cannot fool*
All of the people all the time.

No ; by that power we misname fate,
'Tis character which moulds the state.
Statutes are dead when men's ideals dissent,
And public will is more than precedent,
And manhood more than constitutions can create.
Higher than bar and documental ban,
Men's highest court is still the heart of Man.

V

BOLD to his country, sick with compromise,
Spoke the plain advocate ;

Half slave, half free, our Union dies,

But it shall live ! And done with sophistries,

The people answered with tempestuous call

That shook the revolutionary dead,

And high on rude rails garlanded

Bore their backwoodsman to the Capitol.

“Who is this common huckster?” sneered the
great,

“This upstart Solon of the Sangamon?”

And chastened Douglas answered: “He is one
Who wrestles well for Truth.” But some
Scowled unbelief, and some smiled bitterly;
And so, beneath the derrick’d half-built dome,
While dumb artillery
And guards battalioned the black lonely form,
He took his oath.

We are not enemies, but friends!

Yet scarce the sad rogation ends

Ere the warped planks of Union split in storm
Of dark secession.

Then, as on a raft
Flood-rended, where by night the Ohio sweeps
Into the Mississippi, 'mid the roil
Of roaring waters with eroded soil
From hills primeval, the strong poleman keeps
Silence, midway the shallows and the rocks,
To steer his shipment safe, while fore and aft
The scrambling logmen scream at him, or scold
With prayers and malisons, or burst the locks

And loot the precious bales, so — deaf and
mute

To sneers and imprecations both —

The lone Flatboatman of the Union poled
His country's wreck midstream, and resolute
Held still his goal :

To lash his ballast to the sundered half,
And save the whole.

"They seek a sign,

But no sign shall be given them," he said ;

And reaching Godward, with his pilot's gaff

Probed in the dark, among the drowning and
the dead,
And sunk his plummet line
Deep in the people's heart, where still his own
heart bled,
And fathomed there the inundated shore
Swept by the flood and storm of elemental war.

VI

THE war! — Far on the dim verge of To-day
Its rack of livid splendor fades away.

The bane is past ;

The awful lightnings, spent,

Have wrought a chastening not a chastisement ;

The beauty and the benediction last.

And mustering, in season due,

From farthest hill

And hamlet — still

Keeping the morning last but one in May

Proud with great memories — one by one,
Whose young life sank not with the sun
Of Gettysburg or Missionary Ridge,
Buttons his coat of blue,
And from his whitened hair
Removes the hat with golden-corded brim
And plants again old colors in old graves ;
And groups of simple children fair
And folk of middle age are there
To kneel by him,
And honor, though they cannot share,
His pensive privilege.

Still in the living past we may recall
The war's live tribute. Go to Washington
On New Year's morning of Emancipation,
When even from Arlington
Beyond the Capitol
The streets and alleys all
Surge black with singing tides. There creep a few
Sweet-visaged, swart and hoary men
To bask them in the sun
That beats on Pennsylvania Avenue,
Or lounge in smiling knots
At drowsier spots,

To listen where one boasts again
Of ancient bondage, now his pedigree.
Those are the nation's honored slaves
Knighted of old by the great Proclamation.
For them the empower'd saviour dipt his pen
In blood of equity,
And signed away the curse as old as Ptolemy.

The War! It was a forging blast
From God's own furnace, welding North
And South henceforth
To be one weapon for His hand,

Till even that word which once inflamed the
land

Falls idle at the last :

What need to boast of *unión*, being one ?

The War is done.

Yet who that, in complacent day
Of peace, invokes the right divine
Of labor to reward itself,
Or vested power to hoard its pelf,
Reaping the enviable embrace
Of joy denied to others,

Remembering that dark assay
Our country and our chief withstood,
When fathers sought their sons in blood
And brothers fought with brothers, —
Who then, before the memoried face
Of Lincoln, but must pause, and pray
For love like his, whose larger grace
Outclimbs the individual —
Dreadful, and yet more dear than all —
The love that serves our race.

VII *

“ **T**O sleep, perchance to dream !” — No
player, rapt

In conscious art's soliloquy, might know
To subtilize the poignant sense so apt
As he, almost in shadow of the end,
Murmured its latent sadness to a friend ;
And then he said to him : “ Ten nights ago
I watched alone ; the hour was very late ;

* See Note at end of volume.

I fell asleep and dreamed ;
And in my dreaming, all
The White House lay in deathlike stillness
round;

But soon a sobbing sound,
Subdued, I heard, as of innumerable
Mourners. I rose and went from room to room ;
No living being there was visible ;
Yet as I passed, unspeakably it seemed
They sobbed again, subdued. In every room
Light was, and all things were familiar :
But who were those once more

Whose hearts were breaking there? What
heavy gloom

Wrapt their dumb grieving? Last, the east-
room door

I opened, and it lay before me: High
And cold on solemn catafalque it lay,
Draped in funereal vestments, and near by
Mute soldiers guarded it. In black array,
A throng of varied race
Stood weeping,
Or gazing on the covered face.
Then to a soldier: 'Who is dead

In the White House?' I asked. He said:

'The President.'

And a great moan that through the people went
Waked me from sleeping."

God! that a nation too should have bad dreams!

The cities all are still and voiceless all

The valleys and the woods:

But what are these husht sounds insufferable

Of moaning multitudes?

Through the Republic's silent house

From room to room the awful Spirit walks,

Yet all things are familiar ; it seems
No change has been :
From Maine to Florida
Still flash the blue seas ; California
Is quick with April green ;
The middle ways are pied
With crocus blooms and river fleur-de-lis ;
And the great western rooms are open wide
To greet the northing sun ;
In every one
Are strewn the Saviour's lilies of white peace
In festival of him who quenched the fiery feuds.

What, then, is that which mocks
The victory and grace that were before?
Once more, and now insufferably once more —
The moan of multitudes!
The lofty Spirit knocks
And opening last the door
Into the Capitol, with pensive head,
Stooping his deathless stature o'er the dead,
Looks there on his own image — tenderness,
Pity, on which sad truth has set its seal,
Heroic patience, strong humility,
Power, whose human courage shines not less

That humor leavens the shrewd honesty :
Democracy's own brow — the American ideal.

While triumph pealed his consummated task,
And that great theatre
Where late he watched the war's solemnity
Was narrowed to a moment's comedy,
The sudden angel of the tragic mask
Flashed on his gaze the blinding sepulchre.

VIII

IT was a dream! for that which fell in death,
Seared by the assassin's lightning, and there
lay

A spectacle for anguish, was a wraith;
The real immortal Lincoln went his way
Back to his only home and native heath—
The common people's common heart. And they
Who speak of Lincoln to his countrymen—

Now while one vast communion makes To-day
His temple — speak *to* Lincoln, born again
From that perennial earth
Whereof he had his birth,
And estimating him, they estimate
The source of all that made, and yet shall make
us great.

IX

THE loving and the wise
May seek — but seek in vain — to analyze
The individual man, for having caught
The mystic clue of thought,
Sudden they meet the controverting whim,
And fumbling with the enchanted key,
Lose it then utterly.

Aesop and old Isaiah held in him
Strange sessions, winked at by Artemus Ward,

Till sudden in their midst bright Seraphim
Stood, summoned by a sad, primeval bard
Who, bearing still no name, has ever borne
Within his heart the music of mankind :
Sometime a lonely singer blind
Beside the Ionian sea ;
Sometime, between two thieves in scorn,
A face in Calvary.

That was his master soul —
The mystic demi-god of common man —
Who, templed in the steadfast mind,

Hid his shy gold of genius in the bran
Of Hoosier speech and garb, softening the wan
Strong face of shrewdness with strange aureole.

He was the madstone to his country's ire,
Drawing the rancorous blood of envious quarrel
Alike from foe and friend ; his pity, stirr'd,
Restored to its bough the storm-unnested bird,
Or raised the wallow'd pig from out the mire.
And he who sowed in sweat his boyhood's crop,
And tackled Euclid with a wooden spade,
And excavated Blackstone from a barrel

To hold moot trials in the gloaming, made
By lighted shavings in a cooper's shop,
He is the people's still — their Railsplitter,
Himself a rail, clean-grained, of character
Self-hewn in the dark glades of Circumstance
From that deep-hearted tree
Democracy,
Which, by our race's heritage,
Reforests age on age,
Perpetual in strong fecundity.

X

THOSE are the rails to build republics with,
Their homesteads and their towns. God
give us more

And ever more of such to build our own,
Enlarging still in manhood, not in stone
And iron merely and in metal ore :
Not men, like rails of polish'd steel,
Invoice-begotten breeds, that pour

Stillborn from laboring wombs of stark machines
And all alike,
With flange and spike
To couple and dovetail and serve as means
To cart more gold-dust on the commonweal ;
Not those : but such as breathe
Yet of the trail, the redwood and the ranch,
The gale-swept mountain and the prairie's sheen,
And cities where the stars can still look in
And leave their benediction : common men,
Kindled by nature's awe to contemplation,
And by her goads to courage ; not too vain

Of self, to show the clean knots in their grain,
Blazed from the same great bole that grew Abe
 Lincoln's branch :
Such be the men of whom we build our nation !

XI

BUT he is more than ours, as we are more
Than yet the world dares dream. His

stature grows

With that illimitable state

Whose sovereignty ordains no tribute shore

And borderland of hate,

But grounds its justice in the joy it sows.

His spirit is still a power to emancipate

Bondage — more base, being more insidious,

Than serfdom — that cries out in the midst of us
For virtue, born of opportunity,
And manhood, weighed in honest human worth,
And freedom, based in labor. He stands forth
'Mongst nations old — a new-world Abraham,
The patriarch of peoples still to be,
Blending all visions of the promised land
In one Apocalypse.

His voice is heard —
Thrilling the moulder'd lintels of the past —
In Asia ; old Thibet is stirred

With warm imaginings ;
Ancestral China, 'mid her mysteries,
Unmasks, and flings
Her veils wide to the occident ; the wand
Of hope awakes prone Hierapolis ;
Even by the straits of old that lo swam,
The immemorial sultan, sceptreless,
Stands awed ; and heartened by that bold success,
Pale Russia rises from her holocaust.

And still the emancipating influence,
The secret power, the increasing truth, are his,

For they are ours : ours by the potencies
Poured in our nation from the founts of time,
Blending in us the mystic seeds of men,
To sow them forth again
For harvests more sublime
Throughout the world.

XII

LEAVE, then, that wonted grief
Which honorably mourns its martyred dead,
And newly hail instead
The birth of him, our hardy shepherd chief,
Who by green paths of old democracy
Leads still his tribes to uplands of glad peace.

As long as — out of blood and passion blind —
Springs the pure justice of the reasoning mind,

And justice, bending, scorns not to obey
Pity, that once in a poor manger lay,
As long as, thrall'd by time's imperious will,
Brother hath bitter need of brother, still
His presence shall not cease
To lift the ages toward his human excellence,
And races yet to be
Shall in a rude hut do him reverence
And solemnize a simple man's nativity.

NOTE

The dream of Lincoln, recounted in this poem, takes significance from its authenticity. Shortly before his death, Lincoln actually had this dream, and described it to a friend in words, which the writer has closely followed on pages 38-41. The passage, *To sleep, perchance to dream*, Lincoln himself quoted in this connection. Cf. Norman Hapgood's "Abraham Lincoln, the Man of the People," pages 405-406. It is perhaps worthy of mention that the words of Lincoln, italicized in the Ode, are also authentic, being usually *verbatim* his own. The book, referred to at the bottom of page 23, is of course "Uncle Tom's Cabin."

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